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ABSTRACT

This study examined aspects of adolescent identity formation and the socio-cultural context that shapes the self. A sample of 950 eighth-grade students (males and females of both African-American and European American descent) were asked to identify 2 hero figures (one that they know personally and one that they do not know but is famous) and list the traits they admire in those figures. Subjects were also questioned about self-esteem, ethnic identification, and racial importance. Among the results: (1) European American females had the lowest self-esteem and the majority chose male famous heroes; (2) African Americans chose a family member as a known hero more often than expected, while European Americans chose a teacher more often than expected; and (3) one quarter of the sample, particularly girls, had difficulty and therefore chose no famous hero. The admired traits of the two heroes/heroines chosen reveal gender and racial differences. (Contains six tables.) (MT)

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A Hero With a Thousand Faces: An Examination of Black and White Adolescents' Heroes and Identity Formation[1]

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Introduction

Adolescent identity formation is a socio-cultural process in which personal identity is formed through interactions with the environment (Erikson, 1968). These interactions are not indeterminate, but ones in which the universe of options are clearly delineated by the community. To understand adolescent identity formation, it is necessary to consider the effects of the socio-cultural context that shape the self. This study examines one such context by asking a sample of adolescents to identify two hero figures, one they know personally (Known hero) and one they do not know personally but who is famous (Famous hero). The approach taken in this study is that the heroes chosen, as well as the admirable traits ascribed to those heroes, reflect the collective ideal of the good and acceptable self.

Initial analyses explore the heroes chosen and the valued characteristics that adolescents share across the total sample. Then, differences between boys and girls and African American and European American youth in their choice of Known and Famous hero are investigated. Gender and racial choices of heroes are also examined. Further analyses explore the traits admired by adolescents of their Known and Famous heroes. Again, gender and racial differences in the ascribed traits will be explored.

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Erikson postulated that positive self-esteem comes from being able to assume one's identity from those that are valued and respected by the community. Consequently, adolescents' choice of a hero may be related to their self esteem. Adolescents with high self esteem may choose certain heroes because they have begun to identify with elements of our society that they feel are positive and valuable, whereas low self esteem adolescents may choose certain heroes or have no heroes because they feel disenfranchised from the cultural norms. Similarly, the importance of one's race and the ability to identify positively with one's ethnic group may also be reflected in the kinds of heroes adolescents choose. Adolescents who have a poor sense of ethnic identity and attach little importance to their racial group may not choose heroes who are from their racial/ethnic group and, in fact, may have difficulty choosing any hero at all. Consequently, differences in hero choices on self esteem, racial importance, and ethnic identity are explored.

Methods

The study presented here utilizes data collected as part of a larger, ongoing study of 1482 teachers, parent, and children drawn equally from 23 middle schools in a large county in Maryland by Eccles and her colleagues (Maryland Adolescent Growth in Contexts Study - M.A.G.I.C.S.). Data for this study include children in the 8th grade. Nine hundred fifty (950) adolescents, (462 girls and 488 boys) (620 black, 330 white) completed a questionnaire that included self esteem (α = .78, M=3.54, S.D.=.54), ethnic identity (α = .73, M=2.64, S.D.=.92), and importance of race (α = .62, M=3.00, S.D.=.80) measures. A list of the items used to form the constructs are presented in Table 1. The students were also asked questions about who they know personally whom they admire and who they do not know but think of as a "hero". The children were then asked to list three things they admire about their Known and Famous heroes.

Results

Table 2 presents the frequency of responses in Known and Famous heroes for the entire sample as well as for boys and girls and African American and European American students. Over 50% of the adolescents identified parental figures as the adult they know whom they admire most and 28.1% identified other relatives. There were significant racial

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differences in choice of Known hero [$\chi 2$ (4,1, $\underline{N}$ = 950) = 21.67, $p<.001$]. African American students mentioned relatives more and teachers less often than expected, while European Americans mentioned relatives less and teachers more often than expected. Gender was not a factor in choice of Known hero.

For Famous hero, 28.5% of the sample identified a sports figure as their famous hero, followed by actors and entertainers (21.6%), and popular musicians (19.0%). Twenty-seven percent of the adolescents did not identify a hero. There were significant race [$\chi 2$ (4,1, $\underline{N}$ = 950) = 30.21, $p<.001$] and gender [$\chi 2$ (4,1, $\underline{N}$ = 950) = 227.60, $p<.001$] differences in choice of hero. African American students identified Sports figures and musicians more often than expected, while European Americans mentioned them less often than expected. European Americans mentioned Actors/entertainers more often than expected, while African Americans mentioned them less often. European Americans identified no hero more often than expected, whereas African Americans identified no hero less often. Males mentioned Sports figures more often than expected, and Musicians and Actors/entertainers less often than expected. Females mentioned Musicians, Actors/entertainers, and No hero more often than expected, and Sports figures less often than expected. There were no differences in self esteem or ethnic identity in choice of Known or Famous heroes. However, there were significant differences in choice of hero on Racial Importance. Those African American students who chose no hero reported lower racial importance than did those students who identified a hero. Additionally, there were significant differences in race of Famous hero chosen and ethnic identity. African American students who chose an African American hero reported higher ethnic identity than those who chose a European American hero.

Table 3 presents the significant relationships of gender and race of the Known and Famous heroes to the gender and race of the adolescent. For Known hero, not surprisingly, the girls generally chose a female hero and the boys chose a male hero. However, more boys chose a female hero (24.4%) than girls chose a male hero (15.7%). For Famous hero, over 77% of the famous heroes identified were male figures suggesting that there continues to be a lack of female role models in the environment of girls. As expected, African American students chose an African American hero and European American students chose a European American hero more often than expected. However, a higher percentage of European American students

(31.7%) chose an African American hero than African American students chose a European American hero (6.4%).

Although self esteem and ethnic identity had little impact on the hero choices, it is interesting to note the gender and racial differences found for these constructs. Table 4 presents the Analysis of Variance for these constructs. Boys reported higher self esteem ($\underline{M}$ = 3.09) than did girls ($\underline{M}$= 2.90). African Americans reported higher self esteem ($\underline{M}$ = 3.08) than did European Americans ($\underline{M}$ = 2.85). There were also significant interaction effects: African American boys reported the highest self esteem (3.10), followed by European American boys (3.07), African American girls ($\underline{M}$ = 3.05), and European American girls (2.65). Boys also reported higher ethnic identity ($\underline{M}$ = 2.72) than did girls ($\underline{M}$ = 2.55). African Americans reported higher ethnic identity ($\underline{M}$ = 2.77) than did European Americans ($\underline{M}$ = 2.38). There were no interaction effects.

The admired traits for Known and Famous heroes were also examined. Table 5 presents the percentage of responses of the traits admired for Known and Famous heroes across the three possible responses. The activities they do, such as the job they have or the way they live, were admired more in Famous heroes, whereas personality characteristics and how the hero relates to others were more admired traits for everyday heroes. Analyses revealed that there were race and gender differences in the admired characteristics. Table 6 presents the chi squared analyses for the significantly different characteristics. For Known hero, boys were more likely to admire the physical characteristics of the hero and that the hero did not present any negative characteristics such as drinking or using drugs than were girls. Girls, in contrast, admired their Known hero more because of their personality (they were cool or honest and hardworking) and because their hero was willing to help others and be a good friend. There was only one racial difference in the characteristics admired: European American students were more likely to admire their hero because they helped people and were good friends than were African American students. For Famous heroes, boys were more likely to admire the activities the hero does, whereas girls were more likely to admire their hero because of their physical characteristics or because of their kindness towards others. European American children were more likely to admire their Famous hero again because they helped people, and because of their physical characteristics such as being strong and athletic.

Conclusions

What are the collective representations of the good and acceptable self found in adolescents' known and famous heroes? This research finds that parental figures and other family members play a significant role in the formation of adolescents' identities. Although there were no significant differences in hero choice based on gender, there were significant racial differences, with African American students identifying relatives more and teachers less often than expected and European American adolescents identifying relatives less and teachers more often than expected. These differences suggest that family relationships may be more instrumental in the identity development of African American adolescents than they are for European Americans. This finding is supported by the fact that African American students who chose no hero reported the lowest levels of Racial Importance and those who chose parental figures reported the highest levels. The fact that the teachers in these adolescents' lives are predominantly European American may also contribute to this finding.

Not surprisingly, girls identified with female figures and boys with male figures. However, a higher percentage of boys chose a female hero than girls chose a male hero suggesting that women are particularly important in the day to day lives of adolescents.

In terms of famous heroes, over one fourth of this sample had difficulty identifying a hero, suggesting that today's adolescents may have difficulty identifying with representatives of the cultural norm. However, a closer examination of these findings reveal that girls especially found it difficult to choose a hero. Boys overwhelmingly chose sports heroes (49% of the boys), whereas girls, when they did identify a hero, chose musicians and actors/entertainers. Additionally, among girls who did choose a hero, the majority (55.9%) chose a male hero figure. Further, over 35% of the European American students, compared with 23% of the African American students, did not chose a hero. Together, these findings suggest that males, and to some extent African American adolescents, are able to identify with the individuals our culture holds in esteem. European American girls, it appears, have the most difficulty identifying with a famous hero and tend to identify with male heroes when they do choose. Famous men, and the images they portray, appear to be instrumental in the development of adolescent identity.

The finding that European American girls have the most difficult time identifying a famous hero is supported by the fact that these girls reported the lowest self esteem. Self esteem was not related to choice of Known or Famous heroes, but this may be due to the age of the subjects; their identity and their feelings of self worth have not yet fully developed. In support of this hypothesis, it should be noted that the self esteem differences among the Famous hero groups approached significance ($p=.08$) with those in the No hero group reporting the lowest self esteem. Additionally, we replicated this study with an older group of white, middle class students (10th graders). In this group, self esteem was significantly related to Famous hero choice.

Similarly, Ethnic Identity was also not related to choice of hero. However, African American adolescents reported higher levels of Ethnic Identity than did European American adolescents, and boys reported higher levels than did girls. Also, those African American students who chose an African American as a famous hero had higher levels of Ethnic Identity than did those who chose a European American. This suggests that for African American adolescents hero choice may be a reflection of their emerging sense of ethnic identity.

The adolescents in this study identified different characteristics for the traits they admire in their known and famous heroes. The majority of the adolescents admire their Known hero because they possess such positive qualities as being honest, fun-loving, kind, and helpful to others. Famous heroes were admired for the jobs they have and the way they live, as well as for their positive personality traits. It is interesting to note that girls identified interpersonal and social characteristics as important admirable traits in their known heroes more often than did boys, suggesting that girls organize their identity around interpersonal connection. Boys, in contrast, identified physical characteristics as important for their Known heroes and the activities they do important for their Famous heroes. Boys' identity development at this age may be more concerned with outward appearances and the roles people play. European American adolescents also mentioned interpersonal characteristics more often than did African American youths for Known and Famous heroes suggesting that interpersonal connectedness may be more salient in defining "hero" for European American than African American youth.

Table 1
Constructs used in analyses

Racial Importance ∝ = .62 M=3.54 S.D.=.54 N=626
(Note: Questions only asked of African American students)
(1=Not at all, 2=A little, 3=Somewhat, 4=Very)
How important is your racial background to the daily life of your family?
How important is it for you to know about your racial background?
How proud are you of your racial background?

Ethnic Identity ∝ = .73 M=2.64 S.D.=.92 N=943
(1=Not at all true of me, 2=A little true of me, 3=Somewhat true of me, 4=Very true of me, 5=Extremely true of me)
I have a close community of friends because of my race/ethnicity
People of my race/ethnicity have a culturally rich heritage.
I have meaningful traditions because of my race/ethnicity.
People of my race/ethnicity are very supportive of each other.

Self Esteem ∝ = .78 M=3.00 S.D.=.80 N=956
(1=Almost never, 2=Once in a while, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always)
How often do you wish you were different than you are?
How often would you like to change lost of things about yourself if you could?
How often do you wish you were better looking?
How often do you wish you had more talent at something like music or art?
How often do you wish you were better at sports?

Hero questions:

Known hero

Now think about the adults in your life. Of all the adults you know personally, think of the one you would most like to be like. Who is it? (Relationship to child)
Can you tell me three things you admire most about this person?

Famous hero

Now please tell me who your favorite celebrity or famous person is whom you admire the most?
What three things do you admire most about this person?

Table 2
Frequencies of Known and Famous Heroes by Race and Gender

Known hero	Parent figure	Relative	Friends of family	Teachers/ ministers etc.	No hero
Gender[n.s.]					
Boys	244	136	29	23	42
(expected)	(242.9)	(134.5)	(27.6)	(31.2)	(37.8)
Girls	231	127	25	38	32
(expected)	(232.1)	(128.5)	(26.4)	(29.8)	(36.2)
Race***					
Black	316	188	30	28	45
(expected)	(309.7)	(170.7)	(37.0)	(39.6)	(50.0)
White	161	75	27	33	32
(expected)	(167.3)	(92.3)	(20.0)	(21.4)	(26.1)
Total	477	263	57	61	77
(% of sample)	(51.0%)	(28.1%)	(6.1%)	(6.5%)	(8.2%)

Note. [n.s.].=nonsignificant; *** p< .001

Famous hero	Sports figure	Musician	Actor/ entertainer	Other - historical, political, etc.	No hero
Gender***					
boys	233	40	76	7	122
(expected)	(135.5)	(91.5)	(104.3)	(15.8)	(130.9)
girls	32	139	128	24	134
(expected)	(129.5)	(87.5)	(99.7)	(15.2)	(125.1)
Race***					
black	196	134	120	25	143
(expected)	(176.2)	(117.5)	(133.8)	(20.9)	(169.7)
white	74	46	85	7	117
(expected)	(93.8)	(62.5)	(71.2)	(11.1)	(90.3)
Total	270	180	205	32	260
(% of sample)	(28.5%)	(19.0%)	(21.6%)	(3.4%)	(27.5%)

Note. *** p< .001

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Table 3
Relation of Gender and Race of Known and Famous Hero to Gender and Race of Adolescent

Gender of Known Hero

Gender choices [χ^2=(1, N = 859) = 309.80, p< .001]

	Boys Frequency (%)	Girls Frequency (%)
Male hero	331 (75.6%)	66 (15.7%)
Female hero	107 (24.4%)	141 (84.3%)

Gender and Race of Famous Hero

Gender choices [χ^2(1, N = 675) = 158.90, p < .001]:

	Boys Frequency (%)	Girls Frequency (%)
Male hero	343 (96.6%)	179 (55.9%)
Female hero	12 (3.4%)	141 (44.1%)

Racial choices [χ^2(1, N = 639) = 273.60, p < .001]:

	African American Students Frequency (%)	European American Students Frequency (%)
African American hero	424 (93.6%)	59 (31.7%)
European American hero	29 (6.4%)	127 (68.3%)

Table 4
Analysis of Variance Tables for Race and Gender by Self Esteem and Ethnic Identity

Gender and Race Differences on Self Esteem

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Significance of F
Main Effects	18.72	2	9.36	15.23	.000
Sex of child	7.83	1	7.83	12.74	.000
Race of child	9.76	1	9.76	15.88	.000
2-way interaction					
Sex x race	6.75	1	6.75	10.98	.001
Explained	25.46	3	8.49	13.81	.000

Gender and Race Differences on Ethnic Identity

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Significance of F
Main Effects	37.66	2	18.83	23.39	.000
Sex of child	5.26	1	5.26	6.53	.011
Race of child	30.87	1	30.87	30.34	.000
2-way interaction					
Sex x race	.107	1	.107	.133	.716
Explained	37.77	3	12.59	15.64	.000

Table 5
Percentages of responses of admired traits across three responses

	Known hero %*	Famous hero %*
Physical characteristics - e.g., looks; gender, strong; good at sports, music, art, acting, etc.; older	8.7%	13.7%
Smart - e.g., intelligent; smart; good decision maker	28.8%	11.1%
Personality characteristics - e.g., competent; cool; brave; honest; self-assured; hardworking; has good morals; fun	44.9%	15.9%
Role model - e.g., leader; political activist; peacemaker	12.1%	8.9%
No negative characteristics - e.g., Doesn't break rules; never been in trouble with the law; doesn't drink/use drugs; not physically aggressive	1.2%	1.7%
Interpersonal/social - e.g., heroic; helps people; nice; kind; helpful; good friend	33.8%	8.9%
Interaction with child - e.g., understands me; does things for me; I love him/her; respects me	12.7%	1.3%
Activities they do - e.g., job they have; can cook; want to do what they do; the way they live	13.3%	64.6%
Possessions they have - e.g., car; rich/money; clothes; travel a lot	2.8%	1.7%
Negative characteristics - e.g., Gets his/her way all the time; can drink a lot; gets away with things	.1%	0%
Total number of students who indicated a hero	853	687

Note.
* Percentages do not total to 100% because they have been calculated across three possible responses.

Table 6
Significant Chi Squares for Gender and Race Differences on the Traits Admired

Known hero

Gender differences:

Physical characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 849) = 5.12, p < .05$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	45	26
(Expected)	(35.9)	(35.1)

No negative characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 849) = 6.31, p < .05$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	9	1
(Expected)	(5.1)	(4.9)

Personality characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 849) = 6.19, p < .01$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	175	207
(Expected)	(193.0)	(189.0)

Interpersonal/social characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 849) = 14.79, p < .001$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	119	169
(Expected)	(145.5)	(142.5)

Racial differences.

Interpersonal/social characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 858) = 5.87, p < .05$].

	Black	White
Observed	174	116
(Expected)	(190.0)	(100.0)

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Table 6 cont.

Famous hero

Gender differences:

Physical characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 679) = 24.58, p < .001$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	27	67
(Expected)	(49.3)	(44.7)

Interpersonal/social characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 679) = 10.37, p < .001$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	20	41
(Expected)	(32.0)	(29.0)

Activities [$\chi^2(1, N = 679) = 19.30, p < .001$].

	Boys	Girls
Observed	257	181
(Expected)	(229.6)	(208.4)

Racial differences:

Physical characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 687) = 5.77, p < .05$].

	Black	White
Observed	55	39
(Expected)	(65.0)	(29.0)

Interpersonal/social characteristics [$\chi^2(1, N = 687) = 4.34, p < .05$].

	Black	White
Observed	35	26
(Expected)	(42.2)	(18.8)

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